

# It's not just education . . . IT'S WAR

Ahmed Bawa believes that South Africa's learning crisis should be tackled with the same national vigour and urgency as the Soccer World Cup was — and, in his capacity as vice-chancellor and principal of the Durban University of Technology, he is in the vanguard of the battle. FATIMA ASMAL-MOTALA reports

**A**HMED Bawa believes that South Africans should tackle the education crisis in the country like they are going into battle. "Maybe it's time for us to think about this project almost as if we're going to war," says the vice-chancellor and principal of the Durban University of Technology (DUT). "We did such an amazing job in putting together an excellent World Cup. We did that because we saw that as a national project. We need to focus on education as if the country depends on us getting it right."

The emphasis has to be on primary and secondary schooling. "Notwithstanding the fact that the new green paper on post-school education is in my view a very important step forward in us thinking about the post-school system in interesting new ways, the emphasis has to be on primary and secondary schooling. That's something we have to get right. Almost nothing else is going to work well unless we get primary and secondary schooling to function."

"Although we had an increased matric pass rate last year, KwaZulu-Natal produced only 12 000 pupils with maths at over 40%. This is a crisis."

The answer, according to him, lies in returning to basics. "We have to ensure that young people coming through our system are really taught the basics — how to read and write, history, maths. And we have to understand that unless we go back to basics, building really complex processes of education just aren't going to work."

## EARLY PASSION FOR LEARNING

Passion seems to be a central feature of Bawa's character.

As a young child growing up in Seven Oaks, a small hamlet situated between Pietermaritzburg and Greytown, he devoured books and newspaper articles about geography and history.

Later, as a university student, enraged by the apartheid system, he spent two-and-a-half years behind bars, thanks to his activities with the Black Consciousness Movement and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

These days Bawa — whose first love is physics, a field in which he holds a PhD — is firmly focused on rebranding the relatively young DUT.

"I will go back to physics before I get too old, or die, but I really felt I needed to take on one more job where I could work with an institution to provide young people with the best opportunities to grow intellectually, to grow as citizens, and to grow into young people who can fit into the labour market," he says.

"The nice thing about DUT is that it presented an opportunity to build something new because it's such a new institution. ML Sultan Technikon and Technikon Natal were well established institutions, but the merger was recent. Then the Durban Institute of Technology, as it was called, was made into a university, and that's what appealed to me most — that we'd be working to try to build a new university. It's always a fascinating project, with all its complexities and problems."

## REBRANDING DUT

Bawa admits that the journey has been a somewhat challenging one. "It's been fascinating. DUT really does have its ups and downs. But from a personal point of view I've learnt so much and engaged so much, and have really begun to come to grips with what it is that a university like DUT has to do. Trying to understand how to make it student-centred has been a fascinating experience for me."

In rebranding the institution, he wants to project an image that it is a university which is deeply contextualised, he says. "The reason for that, is for people in the community, around Durban, to see it as their university, rather than an ivory tower, sitting on a hill somewhere."

He is adamant that his other focus — building a research base for DUT — will not detract from that goal. "A research enterprise isn't simply about saying you have the kind of philosophy which is seen to be global — a local context is just as valid a terrain in which to produce new knowledge. For instance one can imagine that an institution like DUT has a huge enterprise in the area of trying to understand what a sustainable city would be, but that's a huge project not particular to Durban. So we have a number of research projects at DUT that work precisely in that area — water research, urban health systems, etc. — all of those are issues



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every city in the world is grappling with. Producing knowledge about the local context is a production of knowledge which feeds into global projects.

"There is a false dichotomy between higher theoretical knowledge and lower practical knowledge. In some senses knowledge is the very interplay between these two domains. If you have a group of students at DUT which works on rural renewable energy systems, it designs these systems, but because this is a university of technology, it sees the need for the project to be taken to the next step which is an implementation project, so it's really about saying let's strike a deal with the community around us. If in the engagement involved, there are problems with the system you produced, this provides impetus for more theoretical research to be done."

## FAMILY INFLUENCES

Away from DUT, Bawa is a family man. "My wife and I have two daughters and two grandchildren. They are really super. We spend a lot of time with them. It's a really important of my life," he says.

His family has also had a definite influence on him, he admits. "Your immediate family really influences you — your parents, your partner, your children. Neither of my parents is a university graduate, but one thing was completely clear to me — they had strong expectations of me to succeed."

Bawa completed his primary and secondary schooling in Greytown, before trying his hand at medicine, which he didn't enjoy. Ironically, it was during his two years at medical school that he developed a love for physics. "It wasn't offered at the school I studied at. When I experienced it at med school, I had this yearning to do it at higher level."

However, financial circumstances meant that he was forced to work and, hence, he had to study through Unisa, completing a degree majoring in mathematics and physics. "I was disappointed. We weren't a rich family. We were more like lower middle-class. There was no possibility of going back to full-time study. My family's business in Seven Oaks was really a subsistence shop. It made just enough for us to survive," he recalls.

"But the important thing is when my parents eventually left Seven Oaks, they hadn't amassed any wealth, but what they went away with was three children who had a sort of decent undergraduate education."

Bawa later obtained an honours degree in physics and a Masters in nuclear physics from what were then known as the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville, respectively, before a scholarship made it possible for him to go to the United Kingdom, where he obtained a doctorate in theoretical particle physics from the University of Durham.

"England was a fantastic experience. It gave us an opportunity to engage with another society. Apart from anti-apartheid activism, we were engaged in a range of other activities like the Free Palestine Movement," he says.

## A LOVE FOR NEW YORK

Apart from holding the position of deputy vice-chancellor at the University of Natal and then at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, as well as serving as the programme officer for Higher Education in Africa with the Ford Foundation, Bawa also spent six years, from 2004 to 2010, in New York, as a professor of physics at Hunter College in the City University of New York.

"I had a joint appointment with Hunter College and the graduate centre where doctoral education took place. It was absolutely fascinating — first of all just engaging with a completely different education system, and then coming to grips with just how diverse the student body is. At Hunter College there are 147 different languages spoken among the staff and students. I miss New York. It's really a very special place. It's almost impossible that we not engage with it in the future."

But for the next few years at least, South Africa and DUT will be his base. "We never planned to be away from South Africa forever," he says. "The idea was always that we'd come back. South Africa is home, and we really see ourselves as South Africans."

And what kind of a lasting impression does he hope to leave at DUT when his five-year contract comes to an end? "I'd be very happy if the quality of teaching and learning improves, the quality and amount of research improves and if the university really works for its students and staff."